Barrie and the Critics

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Barrie and the Critics

It is sometimes difficult for present-day students of the drama to comprehend the stature once accorded James M. Barrie. Most of us agree that he no longer ranks with the most popular playwrights of today, but there is some disagreement on the reasons for this occurrence. As a first step in assessing this phenomenon it might be well to review the plays with particular emphasis upon the critical reaction of his own day, which should, in turn, give some measurement of his former popularity and perhaps coincidently suggest some causes for his current position.

The author himself remarked in an article in The Greenwood Hat "that perhaps the play [Richard Savage] had done some good after all, if only by inducing the Ibsenite and anti-Ibsenite critics to agree about something." This statement, written after the one and only performance of Barrie's first serious attempt in the drama simply means both factions agreed it was a poor play. The length of the run seems to indicate that the audience concurred. But, in spite of an unsuccessful beginning, the experience planted permanently in Barrie the virus of the drama. Phelps emphasizes this when he says: "One would think that the prodigious success of The Little Minister [the novel] and the failure of Richard Savage would indicate to the author his true 'line.' But Barrie, encouraged by success, was inspired by failure, for in the same year [1891] he produced two other plays of no importance, Ibsen's Ghost and Becky Sharp."

The first of these was simply a mock Hedda Gabler, which was running in London at the time, and although it would appear that Barrie was confidently launching out on his own it is significant that on opening night (May 30, 1891) the author's name was purposely omitted from the program. Ibsen's Ghost is important, though, for several reasons. First, it is an early example of Barrie's perfect timing. As H. M. Wallbrook relates, at this period "London was divided into two camps: the Ibsenites behind William Archer and the detesters behind Clement Scott, who had coined the word 'Ibsene.' " Second, although a burlesque, it was so clever-

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ly handled that the "satire, though pointed, was not barbed." This, of course, served to unite the critics who enjoyed what Walbrook called "the Wittiest burlesque he ever saw" and the Times, a "clever little parody." The play ran for over a month as a curtain-raiser and gave Barrie the incentive to work seriously on his first full-length play, Walker, London. It obviously delighted him, too, to know that he could make an audience laugh. He recalled years later the lines of Hedda: "To run away from my second husband just as I ran away from my first, it feels quite like old times;" and how on the first night a man in the pit found it "so diverting that he had to be removed in hysterics." Yet it is not with either Richard Savage or Ibsen’s Ghost that Barrie’s career as a dramatist truly began. Walker, London is the starting point; it represents Barrie working on his own, at a full-length play, with an original story. He had taken several ideas from his popular novel When a Man’s Single, rearranged them, and set them in the unique atmosphere of a houseboat on the Thames. (The central character is a barber who after deserting his bride-to-be poses as an African explorer to spend the honeymoon money.) The play was an instantaneous success, running uninterruptedly in London from February 25, 1892, for 511 performances. It is essentially a well-constructed farce, geared precisely to the tastes of the day. The bulk of criticism can be fairly represented by Child’s comment that Barrie’s "skill as a craftsman is plain already in Walker, London" showing quite clearly that he could have been the greatest writer of well-made plays ever known. It is a play of well-planned situations, exhibiting a sure sense of that which is effective on the stage. In retrospect, the consensus is that "it can only rank as a good piece of journeyman’s work," but following the initial performance several critics were highly impressed, including Clement Scott, who during his day was considered "an infallible judge of what was effective in the theatre." His review in the Daily Telegraph included the following statement: "... The brilliant author reminds one of Robertson far more than a score of Robertson’s feeble imitators. There is no flaccidity about Mr. Barrie. He is a Robertson of today, a Robertson up to date—not so sentimental, but quite as human, as observant, as pungent, as laconic, and a Robertson

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8 H. M. Walbrook, quoted by Darlington, p. 17.
11 James M. Barrie, Peter Pan (New York, 1928), p. ix.
13 Darlington, p. 62.
who has that strange dramatic mastery over the simplest and apparently the most trivial details of life.” It is decidedly modern in its treatment of the domestic situation, its satire on the medical student, and particularly the pseudo-intellectual of the day:

BELL—... I don't see how I can love you. I have reduced love to syllogistic form... (rise—they embrace)
BELL—... Don't.
KIT—Why not?
BELL—It is so—unintellectual.
KIT—But what if we like it?
BELL—How can we? There is nothing in it... You must never pay those infantile compliments to my personal appearance. If you love me, let it be for my mind alone, for all other love is founded on an ontological misconception.16

This and other passages, too, as Phelps points out, are also obvious burlesques on the sentimental drama.11 It was a certain “freshness of humor, an oddness of fancy,”12 too, which induced its popular appeal and prevented the departures from convention from making it appear radically new, as was the case, for instance, with Shaw's Widower's Houses, Pinero's Second Mrs. Tanqueray, and Wilde's Lady Windermere's Fan, all of which opened in London within a year of Barrie's play.

The next year was not so fortunate for Barrie since it was at this time he decided to offer the one-act play Becky Sharp which he had written two years previously, and a comic opera, Jane Annie, written in collaboration with Conan Doyle. The former was based on the last three chapters of Vanity Fair and according to the Times was "at once diffuse and obscure."13 The critic Edward Morton said it "reproduced word for word, the language of Thackeray without reviving the spirit of Vanity Fair."14 Little more can be said about it since no copy of the play is available today, but it is significant in that it taught the dramatist a lesson. In Darlington's words, "The experience was useful to him if it taught him that this kind of stage adaptation from other men's books is seldom worth a good dramatist's while; and he certainly never attempted anything of the sort again."15

1 Clement Scott, quoted by Hammerton, p. 243.
13 Hammerton, p. 241.
16 Darlington, p. 67.
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He learned another lesson in *Jane Annie, Or the Good Conduct Prize*, and that was the fruitlessness of collaboration. Darton says: "As I remember it, it was like a baddish Gilbert and Sullivan. It did not hang well together and was neither inevitable nor surprising—two necessities of stage effect." In all fairness to Barrie it should be noted, however, that after finishing the first act he had become ill and, having to meet a deadline, called in his friend Conan Doyle to finish it. But the cause was lost before it got to the stage. Doyle promised to help, but when he examined the work, as he says himself, his heart sank. He could not conceive what had made Barrie accept the commission, and he completed the "book" purely from friendship, and with no hope of success. It is interesting to notice that Barrie and Doyle ironically predict the outcome in a marginal note: "Greg and Sim (two bulldogs) have a bet that the critics will quote the third and fourth lines here, and say they apply to the opera." The lines are: "plot unsystematic and very erratic."

Such was not the fate, however, of the next work—a play which Phelps calls Barrie's first truly successful venture in the theater because it gave the author general public recognition as a dramatist. The reactions to *The Professor's Love Story* are interestingly varied. An opening night reviewer said, "As a result of seeing *The Professor's Love Story* one steps breezily out into the night, holding one's head ever so much higher than usual." William Archer, on the other hand, called it in *The World* "a calculated disloyalty to art... a patchwork of extravagant farce, mawkish sentiment, and irrelevant anecdote." When comparing the two remarks we need not question the sincerity of either except to say that one is obviously a subjective reaction, the other highly objective or out-and-out prejudicial. Archer, we recall, in 1903, was steeped in the Shavian "social" function of the drama.

The play ran for over 500 performances in London and was similarly successful in the United States where it was produced first by E. S. Willard, who kept it in his repertoire for twenty years. Such a record certainly reveals popular appeal—an appeal which apparently came from unabashed sentiment and charm, and, although in this particular case the sentiment almost went out of bounds, Barrie had obviously stuck to a formula he knew would result in a popular entertainment.

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17 Dartington, p. 66.
This same formula was kept in mind as he went about adapting his two-volume novel *The Little Minister* for the stage, for if *The Professor's Love Story* brought the author public recognition as a dramatist the next play established him as the most financially successful of living playwrights. Under Frohman's management *The Little Minister* was to provide Barrie personally with 80,000 pounds.

This success may be attributed to one characteristic according to a present-day student, Janet Murray—it is "a straightforward romantic love story." But some critics, notably those who wrote their remarks upon emerging from the theater, assessed its effectiveness differently. One of them said:

*The Little Minister* as a play has not only story and character, but the invaluable quality of atmosphere... By some subtle magic, easier to recognize than to explain, the spectator finds himself transposed forthwith into the quaint and primitive community of Thrums, where a soulful and sturdy puritanism battles other forms of human weakness. Here, to begin with is conflict, and conflict is drama. Mr. Barrie from the outset escapes the great besetting danger of the adapter, the temptation to tell some part of the story by retrospective narration. From the moment the curtain rises the story begins to live before us. *The Little Minister* in fine bids fair to rank as the best play of the year. Walbrook agreed and added that November 6, 1897, provided a signal event—"It broke down finally the barriers which had so long and so disastrously stood between Literature and the Drama." George Bernard Shaw, too, in spite of his supposed antithetical position, pays tribute to Barrie's success with the play: "Mr. Barrie is a born story-teller... He does the thing as if he likes it, and does it very well... He has a keen sense of human qualities and he produces highly popular assortments of them... [Gavin and Babbie] are nine-tenths fun and the other tenth sentiment which makes a very toothsome combination." It is significant to note that, in spite of Miss Murray's comment in 1950 that the play "possesses neither enough power nor enough vitality ever again to bear successful revival," the National Broadcasting Company staged an extremely effective television adaptation on its *Matinee Theatre*, December 26, 1957.

The three-year period from 1897 to 1900 was unproductive as far as Barrie's dramatic efforts were concerned, but with the income from

25 Murray, p. 76.
The Little Minister and his novels which were continuing to sell he was assured of a comfortable living. He apparently had time to think, too, about the direction his writing should take him, but his decision to attempt a problem play was ill advised. The Wedding Guest is a serious experiment in the prevalent realistic vein of Ibsen. Although the play was unsuccessful at the box office, it received mixed reactions from the critics. One reviewer found the plot trite and uninteresting but went on to say: "...We find his drama during the second act supremely touching. The play is decidedly one to be seen, and he is hard of heart who does not find a vein of true pathos and one of dramatic interest running through the whole, and combining fairly well. The treatment is imaginative and witty; there are scenes of much delicacy and there is careful psychology."

Another critic, Max Beerbohm, whose comment is probably more representative of the general reaction to the play, says simply, "When he tries, as in The Wedding Guest to try to tackle seriously the serious things around him, then his pathos runs to mawkishness, and his fun apt to jar."

Quality Street, the next play, opened in Toledo, Ohio, in October of 1901. It represents the transition in Barrie's writing from Kirriemuir, or Auld Licht Scotland, to Kensington Gardens. Here is marked the "bridge from Thrums to a world of make believe." The critic for The Athenaeum said: "The claim of Quality Street consists entirely in atmosphere...[It is] very charming and simple. So good is it that we can not help wishing it were a little better. The spectator, however, who represses all tendency to criticism and takes Mr. Barrie's piece just as it is not unwise." This last point suggests a rather obvious premise—that the average playgoer does not maintain this "tendency to criticism" while sitting in the darkened auditorium. Such a condition is particularly fortunate for Quality Street, which suffers considerably more under the scrutiny of the literary critic than does, let us say, The Admirable Crichton. Its magic in the theater was irrefutable, however, for it ran without a break in London from September 17, 1902, to November 20 the following year. Mackail reported: "...An immediate and unquestioned success. Walkley, quoting French and Greek, welcomed it with hardly a word of criticism. William Archer called it a stage classic. The rest of the press—and in those days, a whole column was still considered the right length for these notices—hailed it with equal enthusiasm. The Wedding Guest was forgotten. This, said everyone, was real Barrie, and so in a sense..."
it was."31 Here again, Beerbohm evaluates the playwright's technique quite well. He makes the point that to date Barrie's "most famous mixture is one of tears and laughter," but more specifically says:

Mr. Barrie sets out to show us, as did Miss Syrett (of The Finding of Nemesis), the tragedy of a girl in whom joy of life is being sapped by years of drudgery—a girl growing old without benefit of girlhood.... Miss Syrett went straight to the root of the matter, strong and unflinching. Mr. Barrie hovers around it, smiling and sobbing.... Commercially, it is well for Mr. Barrie that he behaves thus, since the average playgoer loves this kind of behavior as deeply as he is disturbed and annoyed by Miss Syrett's kind. Artistically, too, it is well for Mr. Barrie. Neither his humor nor his pathos blends well with any attempt to create seriously from the materials of real life.32

The year 1902 was much more memorable, however, for another play, The Admirable Crichton, which opened at the Duke of York's theatre on November 4. The critical reaction was mixed here, too, but not in the same manner. All agreed the play was Barrie's most effective dramatic contribution to date. They did not agree about the idea presented. Some critics, like William Archer, who took the play perhaps a little too seriously, "solemnly expressed doubts of whether the dramatist had the smallest idea of the immensity of his attack upon the constituted social order of the country; another critic compared the play with Rousseau's writings which paved the way for the 'French Revolution.'"33 Others were less wary, especially Beerbohm, who said boldly, "I think The Admirable Crichton quite the best thing that has happened, in my time, to the British stage." He went on to explain that the public seemed to understand what Barrie was driving at; they didn't just "cry buckets of tears over the butler." He states: "It is undeniable that the most successful modern plays are those which are most fantastically untrue to real life. But Mr. Barrie's play differs from them in that it is frankly, and of a purpose, untrue to life.... We are not asked to take them [these strange people] seriously. ... Mr. Barrie has always been able to amuse us. But this is the first occasion on which he has succeeded in making us also think."34 Of the later critics some have said, like Darlington, that the social criticism in the play was purely accidental.35 Others believe that the play "began in Barrie's mind as a serious problem requiring serious treatment,"36 but the

31 Mackail, p. 319.
33 William Archer, quoted by Walbrook, p. 72.
35 Darlington, p. 90.
36 Hammerton, p. 331.
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author, realizing that he usually failed when trying to be wholly serious, put the problem in a comic framework.

With the possible exception of Peter Pan, The Admirable Crichton has been Barrie's most popular full-length play, although, understandably, since it "slightly shocked" the audience it had a shorter initial run than Quality Street. It has been successfully revived several times in London, was translated into French and produced at the Théâtre Antoine in Paris, made into a motion picture at least twice—one with the unfortunate title of Male and Female—and has been one of the all-time favorites of college and university theaters.

It would be difficult to conjecture just what Barrie's primary objective was in writing the play, but at least the critics had taken more notice on this occasion than before. In retrospect, too, some of them called attention to its modernity: "This play has been aptly distinguished as the first of the 20th Century English social plays and it demonstrated triumphantly that the theatre was a place where the very basis of civilization could be discussed. The play could have been written with bitterness and defiance. It would have been with Shaw. Barrie accepts the social structure as the result of human nature and satirizes the rebels in a masterly mingling of fantasy and realism contrasting natural with civilized conditions and allowing each to produce the same effect." Even George Bernard Shaw, in a letter to J. T. Grein, gave Barrie credit for "the final relegation of the nineteenth century London theatre to the dust bin." Perhaps Shaw recalled the social satire in Walker, London or the direct, Ibsen-esque attempt, The Wedding Guest; but more than likely he was thinking of The Admirable Crichton, which had not only aroused the critics but had also reached the eyes and ears of a vast public as yet not ready to receive the direct preachment of Shaw.

The next play was of much less consequence. It was actually "an elaborate gastronomic joke" wherein the author concludes that the source of most of the difficulties of the British people is in the fact that they eat too much. Its title was Little Mary and although it was not very successful—it ran for six months in London—the critics were quite happy with it. Sydney Brooks had this to say:

... Here we have the mocking, whimsical, tantalizing Barrie almost, if not quite, at his best. No doubt his moral that sympathy and common sense are the best doctors is a sound one, but one does not go to Mr. Barrie to learn things. Enough that he has this happy, this unique gift of pleasing and pro-

39 Hammerton, p. 342.
voking at one and the same time; that his shy unexpected, topsy turvy wit is still as quietly agile as ever and that in *Little Mary* he hardly for a moment "slops over." Every one will criticize and condemn the construction of the play. Every one will go to see it, and every one will like it."

Another critic, according to Mackail either the Times or Walkley, had only one reservation in a full column of warm appreciation—a reservation which again reflects the futility of analyzing Barrie’s lighter works. "Set down in black and white, the thing seems rather silly."

In the case of Barrie’s next play one is impressed by the strange contrast in critical reaction. Perhaps it is because there had never been anything like *Peter Pan* known in the theater before. Certain of the critics were simply baffled. The public, although a little slow in responding in New York, were not baffled; they welcomed it with open arms. One commentator asserted that the public’s unqualified acceptance was due to Barrie’s timing. "The play came at one of those discouraged moments when the public mind was occupied to an almost marked degree with huge and vexing problems, and with things that were going wrong. Legalized evil doing was rampant in business and politics... Cynicism was the dominant note in literature and dramatic art, a cheerful clever twentieth century cynicism but a bitter and depressing influence, for all that." Into this atmosphere came *Peter Pan* and it came with the free, untrammeled spirit of childhood. Camillo Pellizzi says, "... It is fantasy which in its own way has become will again, not the disturbed and distorted will of post-Romantics or decadents, but the ingenuous and direct will of a child; the lyrical phantom comes to life in an epic song of liberation in childishness." From those who were negative came several cryptic comments:

Accion Davis—a great disappointment... a conglomeration of balderdash, cheap melodrama and third rate extravaganza.

Alan Dale—drivel and the fancies of a disordered mind. Darnton (of *The Evening World*) vowed that Barrie had finished *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by getting up out of the wrong side of the dramatic bed.

Beerbohm was just as sure on the other side as he wrote following the initial production: "Undoubtedly *Peter Pan* is the best thing he has done, the thing most directly from within himself. Here at last we see his talent in full maturity." In addition he admits to the gossamer elusiveness of

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11 Mackail, p. 348.
the play and the futility of trying to describe it in a review. "For me to
describe to you now in black and white the happening in Peter Pan would
be a thankless task. One cannot communicate the magic of a dream.
People who insist on telling their dreams are among the terrors of the
breakfast table. You must go to the Duke of York's there to dream the
dream for yourselves." Among some of the dissenters were those who
claimed Barrie had played a nasty trick and fed them a play meant only
for children, but the great majority agreed with Roy, who said years
later: "For Barrie the real things in life are the eternal verities—not social
issues. Peter Pan can be appreciated by both old and young... It
embodies a profound philosophy of life which is found in the symbolic
significance of Peter himself... the eternal boy in all of us... Humaniry itself is Peter Pan, eternally childish and foolish."

As to length of run, the play has established several records, the
most notable of which is its staging every year at Christmas time in Lon-
don since 1904, running for several months on each occasion. The initial
production in this country ran for 237 performances, with the most
recent revival (1950) playing for 320 performances.

Magill states that Barrie wrote Peter Pan more to please himself
than anyone else and had always considered it "a sort of private pet" which
would probably not be successful. This is borne out in the fact
that upon Barrie's suggestion Frohman agreed to produce Alice Sit-by-the-
Fire to recoup the losses of the more ambitious production. Darlington
recounts the error in their judgment: "Barrie and Frohman could afford
to smile now at the idea that the profits on this play had been relied
on to pay for the losses on the bigger venture, and the smile must have
grown a little ironic when the new play proved hardly able to do more
than pay for itself." Alice Sit-by-the-Fire ran for 115 performances
"which by standards of actress [Ellen Terry] and author was something
far short of success." What did the critics say? Walbrook maintains
that their reactions were mixed: "One called it his most joyous composi-
tion, another his saddest, setting at defiance every recognized rule of
dramatic craftsmanship, playing all sorts of practical jokes upon his
audience, and at the same time manipulating the stops of laughter and
tears with so unrivalled a mastery." The critic for the Saturday Review
said that somehow Ellen Terry seemed too big for the play just as did C.

46 James A. Roy, James Matthew Barrie, An Appreciation (New York, 1938),
p. 181.
47 Magill, p. 56.
48 Darlington, p. 103.
49 Walbrook, p. 108.
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Aubrey Smith. At the same time he admitted to a thorough enjoyment of the performance, stating a recurrent point that “the delightfulness of ‘Alice’ cannot be communicated through criticism.... [The play] depends so little on its framework and so much on its embroidery.”

The consensus indicated that it is probably one of the poorest products of Barrie’s maturity. He had written it for Ellen Terry, and, unlike the plays for which Maude Adams had been the inspiration, the combination was unfortunate. Its greater strength lies in the ingenious satire on the theater.

... When he has told the theatre’s stories with a twist, he has, one feels, been the more Barrie. Nothing could be better satire of the theatre which is for ever given up to the pursuit of some matrimonial intrigue than the play which, for two acts itself a play of matrimonial intrigue, has for its final curtain warning an “especially loud click.” How many constant playgoers, Amy Greys every one of them, sat through Alice Sit-by-the Fire in the belief that it was the real article rather better done until that final fall of the curtain shocked them, perhaps into a reconsideration of the dramatic values on their way home?

Here was Barrie the modern at work, and the particular effect of the satire prompts one to wish the play, as a whole, had been better. Perhaps the characters and situations were just a little too unbelievable or the joke at the end “beaten a little too long and thin.”

Very little criticism is available on the next three plays, which were one-act curtain raisers. Of the first, Pantaloon, the best that can be said is that it is Barrie experimenting in the short play form, a form with which he was soon to become quite proficient. Josephine was an unsuccessful review in three scenes, “his effort to adapt himself to the French medium of political and social satire.” Hammerton discloses that “the impression left on most of those who saw this so-called revue was that of a strangely ineffective skit directed at persons rather than the tendencies for which they stood.” Barrie himself had felt rather shaky about it as disclosed in a letter to his friend Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch: “Josephine is out, but whether it will do is as yet open to doubt. I’ve enjoyed writing it more than most things I’ve done of late, but for one thing a solemn burlesque calls for more from the audience than anything appealing to the feelings, and I dare say the irony is too prolonged. Nothing wearies me more I believe than satire the moment it ceases to be attractive. It is such a confoundedly unlovable vehicle.” The third play,
Punch, was a moderately effective dramatic skit "whose interest was derived from presenting G. B. S. in a top hat and frock coat as the rival to Punch and Judy." 54

Barrie's next effort ranks with the most popular of his plays. What Every Woman Knows opened at the Duke of York's on September 3, 1908, and ran for 384 performances. The New York production, with Maude Adams, ran just as long. This play, which has "a mixture of realistic, romantic and political elements," 55 presented the idea "that men are children, and every wise woman can manage a child." 56 Its success, however, was due to something more than such a simple idea. The London Times' critic suggested that "his strong point is genuine lovable character and he certainly has given us no more lovable character than that of the charming humorous little woman who modestly supposes herself to be without charm." 57 William Archer, who apparently by this time was willing to recognize Barrie as a dramatist of some consequence, said:

The charm of What Every Woman Knows lies not in its probability, but its quaint improbability. We yield ourselves up, for two and a half hours to the whim of an enchanter who conjures up before us, not life as it is, but life as it is pleasant to imagine it... Everywhere life is cunningly manipulated, slightly thrown out of focus, so as to beget in the audience a mood of smiling make-believe. Not truth, but the pleasure implied in the mood, is the author's primary aim... It is a fantasy worked out of materials supplied by keen, and shrewed, and subtle observation... There is both truth and significance in the character of John Shand and Maggie... 58

A similar note on character is struck in the following review from The Evening Post: "The play provided most delightful entertainment in the freshness of its incidents, its whimsical illumination of essential truths in human nature, its happy and vivid strokes of characterization, its constant play of unexpected humor, its touches of pathos and its general, though absolute, freedom from theatrical conventionalities." 59

Such were the opinions of those shortly after seeing the play, but there were others, examining the play removed from the stage, who felt that this improbability of character and situation, which Archer

54 Hammerton, p. 193.
56 Darton, p. 57.
57 Blinkhorn, p. 49.
59 Blinkhorn, p. 47.

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cites as one of its strengths, was its major weakness. Hammerton says there is just "too much to believe about Maggie." Still others felt somewhat like Barrett Clark, who said years later that "What Every Woman Knows reveals nothing new in Barrie, only a reworking of the old" in spite of its still being "valid theatre."

Of Barrie's next four plays, one-acts designed as curtain-raisers, two may be called valid theater without reservation. The Twelve Pound Look and Rosalind reveal Barrie's mastery of the short play form. The former shows the influence of Ibsen and as Phelps contends "has the depth of Ibsen without his grimness . . . . It is the tragedy of failure in success; the husband, identified by Barrie with every man in the audience, had a complacency that literally made his lawful spouse run for her life." The play ran successfully in both New York and London in 1910 and has been revived successfully many times since. Its first producer, Frohman, considered it one of Barrie's greatest, perhaps second only to Peter Pan; "like most others, he realized that in this one act of intense life was crowded all the human drama, all the human tragedy."

Rosalind was received similarly by the critics and stands out, too, as a favorite with the general audience. One reviewer said: "His one-act form has enabled him to keep many things where he wanted them, in the half light. He has recognized the peculiarities of his medium, has used them so as to achieve in Rosalind the special Barrie surface which pleases him and pleases us."

The other two plays were the unpublished A Slice of Life, which was a mockery upon stage conventions of the day, and Old Friends, an unsuccessful attempt on the author's part to present seriously the question of hereditary alcoholism. Of the latter we may note another interesting divergence of opinion. Walbrook, writing not long after its production, called it "a ghostly story told with tragic power... a concentrated tragedy by a master craftsman." Hammerton labels it an "artificial melodramatic sketch." Other than this there is very little published criticism of the play.

Next came a three-act play which in the final estimate would stand as one of the author's major mistakes, at least with respect to
the London production. *The Adored One* presented the strange case of a woman who was on trial for murder. It seems she had pushed a man out of a railway car because he had refused to close the window. The woman is acquitted finally on the basis of her concern for her daughter's health. This was a rare instance where Barrie had misjudged his audience. The *Globe* the next day told the unfortunate outcome: "Baronet Boomed." Walbrook asserts that the author had simply carried his tendency to "freakishness" too far—the satire and comedy did not work in a situation of murder. Barrie immediately set about to rewrite the play, changing the whole story into a dream, but the damage had been done and as far as London was concerned the play failed. Several months later, however, it opened in New York with Maude Adams under the title of *The Legend of Leonora* with a much different reception. In spite of its still being "a very queer sort of play" it ran for four months and remained ever after in Miss Adams' repertoire.

With World War I came a patriotic response on Barrie's part to write for the effort of the Allies. Among these plays was *A Kiss for Cinderella*, about which Walter Pritchard Eaton said: "Here is a play which, scarcely touches the earth .... The master of whimsy, with wings on his pen, says more to our hearts than the realists." Several of the critics thought it overly sentimental; others like the *New Republic* commentator felt that *A Kiss for Cinderella* represents how the "humor saves Barrie's tenderness from the extremeties to which it leans." It prompted him to say further that: "Your attitude toward this man's genius depends altogether, I should imagine, on your general attitude toward heaven. If you believe in heaven, the peculiar kind of child's heaven that is Barrie's, you find it easy to lend yourself to him, to his general wistfulness and shy sensibility and hazel-twig gift for nostalgia. ... Few grown persons of my own acquaintance take any great stock in heaven but when they were little all of them believed in it, not because they were told to so much as because they were able."

More recent commentary seems to agree that the play is somewhat dated owing to topical references and that in terms of construction it is not, for instance, the equal of *Dear Brutus*, which was to follow the next year. Darton, too, points out a "distinct thinness of plot and characterization." Perhaps the play suffered because of Barrie's reaction to the war psychology of the time, but it was another case of his gauging

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69 Darton, p. 86.
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a play to the prevailing atmosphere. Mackail describes the response at its initial performance:

It was drenched in the wartime background... which as one reads it now seems, comparatively speaking, such a cozy and almost fragrant affair. But its test, of course—war or no war—was whether the knitting together of all these fancies would or could reach out over the footlights; and particularly, when the time came, whether the audience would be caught up in the drama... Its magic and kindness, and friendly satire went straight to the public heart... It had its addicts, immediately and throughout, for where it hit the mark it stuck and clung, and there were two Christmas revivals, at other London theatres, during the war; almost while that lasted, as if it were another Peter Pan.10

In his next war play the author seemed to correct most of the ills prominent in A Kiss for Cinderella, and whether or not it is true that it was the "greatest play produced by the war"11 much can be said in its behalf. In his reaction to The Old Lady Shows Her Medals the critic for Current Opinion stresses the difference between the contributions of Shaw and Barrie at this time:

Before the war... Bernard Shaw could amuse and delight an audience. But with the advent of national service and active patriotism, his comic recipe fails.

The London critics said this of Shaw's war play Augustus Does His Bit—"unmitigated boh," "of no importance," "fortile," "combined bad taste and puerility," "utterly silly and feeble." Contrast this with the joy which Barrie's one-act wartime play The Old Lady Shows Her Medals has been received by press and public... When Barrie achieves the pathetic without being mawkish, he is quite irresistible.12

Its one major weakness, strangely enough, seems to center close to what many consider its greatest strength. Darton says that "unhappily, the old lady never seems at all like a real London 'char', and the adventitious Kenneth is not much more like a real Tommy or Jock."13 On the other hand, within these and the other characters in the play are manifested the most universal emotions.14

It should suffice to say here, though, that in spite of its particular application to the milieu of World War I England the play in subsequent years continued to rank second only to The Twelve Pound Look in popularity, among the author's short plays.

No such reference to specific time or place exists in Dear Brutus,

10 Mackail, p. 492.
11 Phelps, Essays, p. 59.
13 Darton, p. 90.
14 Hammerton, p. 414.
however, a play which has been aptly called the author's "most mature play."\textsuperscript{15}

... [It] is a game of what might have been... a game that probably all men play from youth to old age... But the play is much more, of course,—[its] philosophy is simply a second chance changes nothing... a pessimistic play made palatable by a "happy ever after" ending.

Barrie gives healing not by transcendent optimism like Ibsen but rather through infinite pity.

A tragic scene where we wait for the painter to awaken... "Things that are too beautiful can't last" is a line that goes to the heart of everyone capable of suffering.\textsuperscript{16}

These were the words of a critic writing after a revival of the play in 1922 when it began to look as if Dear Brutus had certain qualities which would make it even more effective than at its initial production. This is particularly significant upon realizing that Barrie thought of it as a war play. In a letter to William Gillette, which the actor read to the New York opening night audience, the dramatist said:

Dear Brutus is an allegory about a gentleman called John Bull who, years and years ago, missed the opportunity of his life. The Mr. Dearth of the play is really John Bull. The play shows how on the fields of France father and daughter get a second opportunity. Are not the two to make it up permanently or forever drift apart? A second chance comes to few. As for a third chance, who ever heard of it? It's now or never. If it is now, something will have to be accomplished greater than war itself. Future mankind are listening for our decision. If we cannot rise to this second chance, ours will be the blame, but the sorrow will be posterity's.\textsuperscript{17}

Desmond McCarthy, writing somewhat later, called it another bit of excellent timing on Barrie's part when in the Saturday Review of Literature of June 29, 1929, he said: "Dear Brutus was written at a time when people cried to get away from realism—Barrie the popular, airy, sentimental playwright, whom no one considered a pioneer, did it."\textsuperscript{18}

That the play was a popular success goes without saying. In 1917 and 1918 it ran for 365 performances and at two revivals subsequently almost 400 performances. It was able, too, to gain the endorsement of certain exponents of "realism" who in other instances shied away from the Barrie appeal. Perhaps this was due to the realistic way in which the play could be produced. Watson and Pressly tell us, for instance, that Gerald du Maurier "brought to the character [Dearth] the lightest and most fluent

\textsuperscript{15} Magill, p. 68.
\textsuperscript{16} John Follock, "Four Plays of the Season," Fortnightly Review, August, 1922, p. 955.
\textsuperscript{17} James M. Barrie, quoted by Hammerton, p. 441.
\textsuperscript{18} Desmond McCarthy, "A Present-Day Dramatist," Saturday Review of Literature, June 29, 1929, p. 1140.
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naturalism to be found among London's admirable comedians." Granville-Barker asserted that there is no machinery in the play to de-humanize it. "The magic of Dear Brutus involves none at all, and the more realistically the play is treated the better." On the question of theatricality Darlington tries to show "why an audience seeing Dear Brutus in the theatre swallows the pill and tastes only the jam."

One reason is that people listening to a story have a primitive tendency to concentrate their interest on the fate of the hero and heroine, and to be quite callous about the importance of minor characters. The hero and heroine of Dear Brutus are Will and Alice Dearth. They are the two exceptional people of the play, who are capable of learning by their adventures in the woods. Dearth regains his self-confidence; Alice learns that she is better off as she is than she would have been if she had married the other man. The second reason is perhaps only the same one in a different dress. It is that we are all, to ourselves, the heroes and heroines of our own little dramas; we all have a conviction that if there is a chance for exceptional people there is hope for us.

Barrie's next play, his last popular success, was received by the general public again without reservation, but not so by all the critics. This time the dramatist made an unequivocal assault on the emotions, and for 400 performances "beginning on April 22nd [1920] audiences wept, sniffed, swallowed, and choked without ever being able to explain what had reduced them to this state." Mary Rose, needless to say, is an odd play and unlike Dear Brutus, as Granville-Barker points out, possesses strangely mixed elements. "... The real and the unreal are boldly mingled; there is neither evasion of the difficulty nor compromise. Upon the magic island she must disappear before our eyes. This is a matter for a single risky moment which, moreover, led up to with extraordinary dramatic skill, and a sympathetic producer may compass it." No such "risky moment" had occurred in Dear Brutus, and such boldness prompted one critic to say years after its first production, "The escape into fantasy, which in Peter Pan and Dear Brutus is perfectly justified by a general epiclyrical atmosphere, seems out of place and arbitrary in a story like that of Mary Rose, which should be purely dramatic." On the other hand, one commentator, Maurice Baring, after having witnessed a performance

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21 Darlington, pp. 124-125.
22 Mackail, p. 146.
23 Granville-Barker, preface, Boy David, p. xi.
24 Pellizzi, p. 171.
"thought the Act III scene where Mary Rose comes back the most moving thing he’d seen on the stage." A similar impression was received by Desmond McCarthy, who simply said "never have tricks with time been played with such dexterity." Another eyewitness to the opening night agreed that the tricks worked.

Barrie has done something very rare for the stage... [He has] had a fleshly ghost come off successfully.

He has depicted for us the psychology of the spirit severed from the body... We see it summoned to converse with the living by the force of thought... It lives in memory... We who have suffered with her find in her departure the catharsis of feelings that have been raised and troubled."

More interesting, however, than this are efforts to discover the play's central meaning. The London Times didn't even try, stating, "It can't be explained any more than a great piece of music can be explained." Ralph Block says, writing to the New York Times: "... There is a girl who doesn't grow up and a Never-Never Land to which she flies, as well as a home that has forgotten her when she returns. But all of it has achieved so complete a trans-valuation into serious human values that what has been merely sentimental and regretful and pathetic in Barrie before becomes austere and meaningful and tragic." The critic for Current Opinion said: "... For once Barrie has made an actual impact between two powerful motives—death and life. He does not shrink from the issue, and the result is clear tragedy." These and other comments prompted Barrie to say in a letter to Cynthia Asquith on December 27, 1920: "Cables from New York about the Mary Rose production make me doubtful about its course there. They say the audience was enthralled but the press can't make out what it means. I wish you would tell me what it means, so we can settle this for once and for all." Actually, its central meaning is nothing more than the obvious: none of us can return to this life once we have departed. It was an idea that had intrigued him for some time. In fact, in a letter to Quiller-Couch in 1911 he said: "... There is no doubt about its being a fine subject but the difficulty is that it seems to lead to a grim end, and rather a queer view of life altogether. I have often thought of it in 3 acts and see the first two all right. The third seems to amount to this. No one should come back, however much he was loved."
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Quite the opposite reception was given Barrie's last play, The Boy David. Most of those who witnessed the occasion attribute its failure to a combination of unavoidable circumstances, the most important of which were Barrie's ill health, the ill health of the leading actress, and the misfortune of the opening night coinciding with King Edward VIII's abdication in December of 1936.

The negative remarks seemed to revolve around the contention that Barrie had been essentially dishonest in altering the facts of the Bible story. It is difficult to conceive of such an accusation upon reading the play, but perhaps certain actors' interpretations prompted the comment. This might easily have happened since Barrie had been unable, as was his practice, to attend many of the rehearsals. On the other hand, Roy suggests that its failure was due to the fact that "it showed David too much like Peter Pan, an ineffectual one."  

On the positive side are statements such as Granville-Barker's: "It is one of life's fundamental conflicts that is here reduced to such deceptively simple terms and crystallized, as drama should be, into significant action and a few revealing words." Harold Child felt that Barrie had finally reached his ultimate goal in The Boy David.

At the very end of his career he found out what it was that he had been groping after in Peter Pan. It was not the domination of reality by play; the making the world his toy....

Michael says in Peter Pan, "Wendy, I've killed a pirate!"

David says, "Mother, I've killed a lion!" They are both children; but one is childishness as distinct from manhood, the other is the childhood at the core of all humanity.... Here is the intuitive wisdom of childlike humanity."  

In general, however, the press reacted in disfavor, and the play ran for only two months. It was the greatest disappointment in Barrie's career that his last effort should be received in this manner. As Mackail relates, "It was a wound from which there could be no recovery."  

The Boy David was the thirty-seventh of the dramatist's plays to reach the commercial stage; we have discussed all those for which there is available information in terms of critical and popular reaction, trying not to exclude major dissenting criticism nor to overemphasize laudatory appraisal. From this, then, what conclusions can be drawn?

First, there is evidence of Barrie's continual experimentation. He tried the problem play, the comic opera, the burlesque, and the straight

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80 Roy, p. 247.
81 Granville Barker, quoted by Asquith, p. 8.
82 Child, p. 37.
83 Mackail, p. 706.
fantasy to name some of the dominant types, and within specific forms attempted different mixtures of sentiment, humor, pathos, and satire. The critics observed a growth in his work from 1892 with the pure entertainment in *Walker, London* to 1917 and the complex art of *Dear Brutus*, and within this period perceived definite innovations commonly called "modern" which were somehow accepted by the public with little reservation. These new devices led one critic, Bernard Shaw, to remark that it is to Barrie that credit is due for relegating the nineteenth-century London theater to the dust bin. It was noted, too, how often plays of Barrie emerged at the proper psychological moment; how, on such occasions as the production of Ibsen's *Ghost*, *Peter Pan*, *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals*, and *Dear Brutus*, the public mind was ripe to accept what Barrie had to offer.

More important, however, is the recurrent stress on Barrie's facility for creating certain theatrical effects—effects of mood and atmosphere gauged so precisely to and derived from the conditions of the theater. It is under these same conditions that he makes an appeal to the emotions rather than the intellect, and wherever truth is expressed it is through the medium of character and significant action rather than through words.

Barrie's subject matter and peculiar approach are seemingly out of step with contemporary modes and manners, but all of this aside, there seems to be a more fundamental reason for his relatively minor position today. The plays are essentially theatrical pieces rather than literary works. Not that the terms are mutually exclusive, but with Barrie the appeal was primarily to the eye and too infrequently is the reader given aural pleasure. In the literary sense he was a magician; audiences, and play reviewers for the most part, have been captivated by this magic but time has disclosed the tricks, and as with any act of magic its attraction is lost when explained.